DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 120 EA 005 863

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TITLE Implications of Decreasing Student Enrollments.
PUB DATE 26 Feb 74
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at American Association of School Administrators Annual Convention (106th, Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 22-26, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Educational Finance; *Educational Planning; Educational Quality; Elementary Schools; *Enrollment Trends; *School Closing; School Personnel; Speeches; *Student Enrollment

ABSTRACT

In this speech, the author explores some of the implications of decreasing school enrollment, while emphasizing the need for study and planning, suggesting some strategies and courses of action, and indicating some concerns. Topics considered include reducing the number of school personnel, educational finance, and the quality of educational programs. The author analyzes, in some detail, the process of closing a school should a decline in enrollment warrant such a closure. (Author/DN)

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
106TH ANNUAL CONVENTION

FEBRUARY 22-24, 1974 ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.

ED 087120

SPEAKER: Raymond G. Arveson, Superintendent, Unified School District, Hayward, Calif.

TOPIC: Implications of Decreasing Student Enrollments

TIME: 10:30 A.M. Tuesday, February 26

PLACE: Room 21, Convention Hall

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The explosively rapid growth of California's school enrollment during the 50's and 60's conditioned school administrators to the burgeoning population syndrome. The remarkably excellent accommodation to that growth syndrome will long stand as a tribute to the ingenuity of California's school administrators.

Now administrators face the challenge of a new and enigmatic phenomenon, the "shrinking school district." Total public school enrollment decreased in California during the 1971-72 school year for the first time in recent California educational history. In a Sacramento press conference on September 12, 1972, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Wilson Riles reported that California's K-12 school population this year would be 38,000 pupils less than it was in the 1971-72 school year; and that the decline could be expected to continue until 1973, when it would level off and begin a gradual increase. State Department of Education reports indicate that 39 school districts had an enrollment decrease of over 500 pupils between 1969-70 and 1971-72; during that same period of time 107 districts had decreases ranging from 50 to 500 pupils.

There are multiple causes of the enrollment decline. The prime cause would appear to be the decreasing birth rate; the United States Public Health Service reports that the birth rate has been decreasing steadily since 1958, and is now at the lowest rate since records started being kept. Other general factors affecting school enrollments include the decelerating immigration into California, the maturing population, cost and shortage of housing, population shifts (e.g., the flight to the suburbs), industrial development or decline, freeway construction and rapid transit systems.

The trend to lower school enrollments is clear and the ramifications of this phenomenon are being experienced by an increasing number of school districts across the state. The purpose of this Management Action Paper is to explore some of the implications of decreasing school enrollment, emphasize the need for study and planning, suggest some strategies and courses of action, and indicate some cautions. Particular emphasis will be given to examining in some detail the process of closing a school should that become necessary.

It's Happening in Hayward

The Hayward area grew rapidly in the two decades from the mid-forties, with a correspondingly rapid growth in the school population. Then, in 1967 the enrollment began to decline at an accelerating rate; in the last five years the school enrollment in the Hayward Unified School District has decreased by 5,000 pupils. This circumstance has brought with it a multiplicity of problems in the areas of staffing, financing, educational programs, utilization of school facilities, and communications.

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Reducing the Personnel Complement

Fewer students usually mandates fewer staff members, primarily because of the financial implications. This has been the case in Hayward. With the loss of students, it became necessary to reduce the number of classified and certificated positions. Reduction of the classified staff requires advance planning; however, except in extreme cases it can be accomplished through normal attrition and the use of substitutes. Decreasing the administrative staff can be handled in most cases through attrition and reassignments. This, too, calls for careful and extensive advance planning. Reduction of the teaching staff is an incredibly intricate process. The administrator in charge of certificated personnel must be thoroughly knowledgeable of the Education Code sections pertaining to the reduction of probationary and permanent certificated employees caused by a decline in average daily attendance (note particularly EC Sec. 13262, 13263, 13443 and 13447). The process should never be undertaken without comprehensive consultation with the County Counsel. It is worth noting that the determination of the order of employment, an essential procedure in staff reduction, can apparently be accomplished with the least trauma by having an independent auditing firm randomly assign numbers to employees that determine their order of employment (EC Sec. 13263).

Financial and Budgetary Concerns

Decreasing numbers of students invariably brings with it perplexing financial problems, particularly in medium and low-wealth school districts. Fewer students means less state income. Those districts that receive equalization aid and supplemental support suffer a double loss if their formula changes because of the increased assessed valuation per ADA. An adequate state-guaranteed base of support for each pupil appears to be the logical answer to this dilemma; the Serrano-Priest case should be a mandate to the legislature for such a solution.

Ever complex, budgeting becomes even more intricate in a "shrinking school district". Because financing the district is so dependent on the number of pupils, accurate projections are imperative. Beware of over-projecting; there are dire consequences, most important of which are over-staffing and loss of anticipated and budgeted state income. Reserves may not be adequate to compensate for over-projection errors. There are many projection techniques in use. It will be essential for staffs of "shrinking school districts" to analyze them and utilize the procedure that best fits their districts.

Educational Program

What happens and what could happen to the educational program and to educational services in districts with sharply declining enrollments deserves extensive and special attention, much more than can be given in this Paper. Districts that have coped with the enrollment decline and the attendant financial problems have become all too familiar with the word "curtailment." It has become necessary to eliminate educational programs and services in order to exist. Numbers of classes offered to high school students, number of class offerings, counseling, consultant, psychological and nursing services and music programs are among the many reductions that have been made in "shrinking districts."

The important message in the crucial area of educational programs is to study thoroughly and plan carefully for the implementation of curtailments, if and when they have to be made. All the options and alternatives should be known and considered. Extensive staff and community involvement is important. Strategies for determining priorities are available and successfully in use; they should be discovered and utilized.

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The Process of Closing a School

Opening a new school is a joyful event. Students, parents and staff members are delighted to have their own new school. Most of you have experienced this happy circumstance directly or vicariously. Parents, and staff too, develop a very real proprietary and provincial interest in their school. Imagine then, if you haven't experienced it, the sense of loss and the strength of the negative feelings when the parents and school personnel are informed that their school may be closed and that their children will have to attend another school. It's a situation potentially fraught with tension and trauma. Mishandled, the project may fail or leave scars of bitterness that are slow in disappearing.

It has been necessary to close four elementary schools in the Hayward Unified School District in the last two years. Two elementary schools were closed two years ago, and two more have been closed for the current school year. Although the schools have been discontinued as elementary schools, they have not been closed, but have been put to other uses. Two of them are being used as continuation high schools, one is a day adult school, and the fourth will be a children's center.

Many lessons were learned from the painful experience of closing the first two schools. Although the necessity for closing some schools had been discussed for more than a year, the Board of Education did not take the final action to close the first two schools until the spring of 1970. Then the closing was not fully resolved until the end of the school year because the decision was taken to court by a group of parents. The judge ruled in favor of the District and the two schools were closed as elementary schools for the 1970-71 school year.

The decision proved to be a wise one and the parents have been very well satisfied with the new school arrangements for their children. Rather than recount all of the errors and pitfalls in the first episode, let us move to consider the procedures that were followed with good success the second time around.

It was apparent, after closing the first two schools, that the school enrollment would continue to decrease and that it would be necessary to close additional schools. Consequently, this information was immediately communicated to the entire community through parent newsletters and the press. It was decided at that time that no additional schools would be closed during the next school year, and that a comprehensive study would be made, with tentative plans to close at least two more schools for the 1972-73 school year.

Early in the 1970-71 school year, a committee was appointed to make a study of elementary schools and projected school enrollments, to determine which schools should be considered for closing. Six elementary principals and several District staff members conducted the study. The committee used a survey questionnaire to gather the necessary research data.

The results of the survey were analyzed and utilized to formulate the recommendations and rationale for the closing of additional elementary schools. A complete report was made to the Board of Education in the fall of 1971. Three schools were to be considered for closing and the procedures for further consideration were announced. Separate meetings would be held with the staffs and parents of each school being considered before the Board of Education took action to close any of the schools.

The staff and parent meetings were arranged and several District staff members attended each meeting; the Superintendent served as chairman of the parent meetings. Written invitations to the meetings were sent to each parent by the school principal and the meetings were held at the schools under consideration. Needless to say, the meetings were well attended. Following an initial informational presentation, the balance of the meetings

was devoted to question and answer and discussion period. Everyone who wished to speak was given the opportunity. The meetings lasted about two hours and, although numerous negative reactions were expressed, there was general understanding of the problems faced by the District and an acceptance of the fact that some schools would have to be closed. The announcement was made at each meeting that parents and staff members would be informed of final recommendations, and that they would be given the opportunity to be heard by the Board of Education before the Board made its decision.

In February of 1972 the Board of Education met for final consideration of the matter. It was recommended that two elementary schools be closed for the 1972-73 school year. No one came forward to speak against the recommendation and the Board took the necessary action. Staff members then proceeded with the orientation of students and parents, and the implementation and closing of the two schools. A well planned and orderly transition was made.

It should be noted that parents in recently unified school districts can block the action of the Board of Education by having one-third of the parents in the attendance area of the school to be closed sign a petition requesting continuance of the school (EC Sec. 3106). Efforts have been made to change this Code Section, but they have been unsuccessful. It should be changed because it was not meant to apply in the present context of a declining school enrollment.

The closing of a school will seldom, if ever, be an easy process. It can be facilitated, however, with a well-defined plan of action. Minimally, this plan should include the following steps:

1. Adequate initial communication
2. An adequate period of time for comprehensive study and planning
3. Public announcement of tentative recommendations
4. Public hearings at the school sites
5. A public hearing before the Board of Education
6. Well-defined orientation and transitional plans
7. A humane and understanding approach to the process

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